

THE MYSTERY OF GOD (C 198-267, USC Ch. 5)

I believe in one God...

Introduction to the Creed

In the Sept. 2009 issue of *Catholic Update*, Professor Scott Hahn writes:

A creed is an authoritative summary of Christianity's basic beliefs. In the articles of the creed, we profess our faith in mysteries – doctrines that could never be known apart from divine revelation: that God is a Trinity of persons, that God the Son took flesh and was born of a virgin, and so on. If God had not revealed the mysteries of Christianity, the mysteries we rehearse in the creed, we could never have figured them out on our own.

A creed is not the totality of Christian faith. It's a summary that stands for everything that is taught by the Catholic Church, which is itself one of the mysteries we proclaim in the creed. A creed is a symbol of something larger – and, ultimately, of Someone we love, Someone who loves us and makes us who we are, by means of creeds and other graces.

Most Catholic missals include the texts of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.

The *Apostles' Creed* is based upon the most ancient formula used by the Church in Rome. We find it in various forms dating back to the 200's.

The *Nicene Creed* is based upon the faith expressed at the first two ecumenical councils of the Church: the fourth-century Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

God is Holy Mystery (USC p. 50-51)

To speak of God is a daunting task. Anything we say about God is very inadequate, for God is a Being always way beyond our human comprehension. The great medieval doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), knew this better than most. After writing several volumes of theology, Aquinas suddenly stopped writing after celebrating Mass one morning. When asked why he stopped, he replied, "I cannot go on...all that I have written seems to be like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me." Thomas also said, "This alone is true knowledge of God—to know that God is beyond knowing."

Stating the above does not mean that the mystery of God is total darkness that shuts us out completely. After all, God became one of us in Jesus. In doing so, God unveiled for us something of the mystery of his being.

God reveals his name to Moses (C 203-227)

"God, who reveals his name as "I AM" reveals himself as the God who is always there, present to his people in order to save them." (C 207)

"To disclose one's name is to make oneself known to others; in a way it is to hand oneself over by becoming accessible, capable of being known more intimately and addressed personally." (C 203)

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he asked God his name. God answered: "I AM who AM." The *Catechism* (C 206) tells us that this divine name is mysterious just as God is mystery. "It is at once a name revealed and something like the refusal of a name..." It tells us that God "is infinitely above everything that we can understand and say... and yet he comes very close to us."

God's mysterious name tells us that he is living and personal; that he is very close to us, in fact closer to us than we are to ourselves. No one could be closer to us than the God who creates, sustains and loves us. At the same time, God is "totally other," totally beyond our comprehension, he is divine and perfect in every way. In theology, these attributes of God are often referred to as *transcendence* and *immanence* of God, the God who is beyond us and at the same time very close to us.

Our God communicates himself to us through *deeds* and *words*. He reveals himself to us through creation. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:2). He most especially reveals himself to us through *Jesus*. God communicates with us in the depths of our hearts. Our challenge is to develop inner ears for God's communications. In his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Augustine writes about God's closeness and his deafness and absence:

A God of Truth and Love (C 214-221)

“He is the Truth, for ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness’; ‘God is love,’ as the apostle teaches.” (C 214)

God is Truth. Psalm 119:160 reads: *“The sum of your word is truth; and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever.”* Since God is Truth, his words cannot deceive. His Word can be trusted and hence we can totally abandon ourselves to him. The *Catechism* (215) reminds us that the beginning of sin was Adam and Eve’s seduction by the tempter (“the father of lies”) who led them to believe that God’s Word could *not* be trusted. God’s Truth was fully revealed to us in Jesus who said: “I am the Way, the *Truth* and the Life” (Jn 14:6).

God is Love. In his first letter, John writes: *“God is love ...this is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be the sacrifice that takes our sins away”* (4:9-10). In the Old Testament, God’s love for Israel is compared to a father’s love for his son. “His love for his people is stronger than a mother’s love for her children. God loves his people more than a bridegroom his beloved; his love will be victorious over even the worst infidelities...” (C 219). The core of God’s being is Love, the love the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father, a love so strong it becomes a third divine Person of the Trinity. To this central mystery of our faith we will now turn.

The Trinity (C 238-267, USC P. 51-53)

“The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself.” (C 234)

The mystery of the Trinity is not something to be understood, a puzzle to be solved. Rather it is a mystery in terms of depths. It means that we can never say a final word about God; there is always more to discover and understand, always more to experience. Concerning the Trinity, the mystic Blessed Julian of Norwich said: *“The Trinity is our Maker. The Trinity is our Keeper. The Trinity is our Everlasting Lover. The Trinity is our endless Joy.”* Through study, faith, prayer, and community, we journey into the inner life of the Trinity. Let us now look at how God revealed himself to us as a trinity of persons.

God the Father. The Old Testament scriptures called God *Father* because he was the creator of the world: “Is he not your father who created you?” (Dt 32:6) God is also Father because of his covenant with Israel. “Israel is my son, my first born” (Ex 4:22).

The Father revealed by the Son (C 238-242). In John’s Gospel, Jesus calls God “Father” forty-five times. In John 10:30, Jesus says: “The Father and I are one.” In John 14:8-10, Philip says to Jesus: *“Master, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”* In response, Jesus says: *“...To have seen me is to have seen the Father... Do you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”* In these verses we see two things: a) that Jesus is the One who reveals the Father to us; b) that Jesus and the Father are one. Jesus is the divine Son of God. The *Catechism* (240) states: “Jesus revealed that God is Father in an unheard-of sense; he is Father not only in being Creator; he is eternally Father in relation to his only Son who, reciprocally, is Son only in relation to his Father: ‘No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’.”

The *Catechism* (239) also reminds us that the image of *mother* can also be applied to God – to express “the parental tenderness” which the Creator has for his creatures. Of course, God, being pure spirit, is neither male nor female. He transcends human fatherhood and motherhood.

Jesus reveals the Spirit (C 243-248). Towards the end of his public ministry, Jesus started to speak about the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, whom he promised to send upon his followers: “I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of Truth” (Jn 14:26). The fulfillment of this promise occurred on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples gathered in the Upper Room (Acts 2:1-4). The *Catechism* (243) states: “...the Spirit will now be with and in the disciples, to teach them and guide them ‘into all truth’. The Holy Spirit is thus revealed as another divine person with Jesus and the Father.”

The *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit,” is a powerful account of the *revelation* of the Holy Spirit. (See article 7 for more on the Holy Spirit.)

While we will not find in the New Testament epistles a developed articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is clear that the early Church community did believe in the mystery of three divine Persons in one God as the following two quotes testify. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians with this Trinitarian greeting:

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

The opening verse of 1 Peter also expresses belief in a triune God. “*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion... In the foreknowledge of God the Father, the sanctification by the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ; may grace and peace be yours in abundance.*”

In the very early days of Christianity, belief in the Trinity was expressed in the sacrament of Baptism. In his Great Commission statement, Jesus told his Apostles: “*Go make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*” (Mt 28:19).

Articulation of trinitarian dogma or belief (C 253-256)

During the first centuries, the Church sought to clarify its Trinitarian faith, both to deepen its own understanding of the faith and to defend it against the errors that were deforming it. This clarification was the work of the early councils, aided by the theological work of the Church Fathers and sustained by the Christian people’s sense of the faith. (C 250)

The *Nicene Creed*, (more accurately called the Nicene/ Constantinople Creed after two important Church councils: Nicea 325 AD and Constantinople 381 AD), is one of the early Church’s first attempts to express the inexpressible. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states that the doctrine of the Trinity includes three truths of faith:

- *The Trinity is One. We do not speak of three Gods but of one God. Each of the Persons is fully God. They are a unity of Persons in one divine nature.*
- *The Divine Persons are distinct from each other. Father, Son and Spirit are not three appearances or modes of God, but three identifiable persons, each fully God in a way distinct from the others.*
- *The Divine Persons are in relation to each other. The distinction of each is understood only in reference to the others. The Father cannot be the Father without the Son, nor can the Son be the Son without the Father. The Holy Spirit is related to the Father and the Son who both send him forth.* (p. 52-53)

Speaking about the doctrine of the Trinity, the late Pope John Paul II said: “*Even after Revelation it remains the most profound mystery of faith, which the intellect by itself can neither comprehend nor penetrate.... The intellect, however, enlightened by faith, can in a certain way grasp and explain the meaning of the dogma.*”

The missions of the Persons of the Trinity (C 257-59) Theologians often speak about the special missions or roles of each of the Persons of the Trinity in relationship to our eternal salvation. Hence, we speak of God the Father as *Creator*, the Son as *Redeemer*, and the Holy Spirit as *Sanctifier*, even though all three work together in carrying out these missions. When we praise and glorify one Person of the Trinity, we are praising and glorifying all three.

As stated earlier, the doctrine of the Trinity is not something to be understood, but to be revered and adored. In God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit we live, move and have our being (Acts 17:28). God revealed his inner nature to us out of a motive of love and because his plan is to draw us into intimacy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The *Catechism* (221) beautifully states: “*God’s very being is Love. By sending us his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and he has destined us to share in that exchange.*”

Trinitarian spirituality. If we pay attention to the official or liturgical prayers of the Church, e.g., the *eucharistic prayers* of the Mass, we will find that they are very trinitarian. We usually address our prayers to God the Father. We go to the Father through Jesus who is always praying in us. The Holy Spirit is the one who joins our prayers to the prayer of Jesus. Ideally, our personal spirituality is also trinitarian allowing us to have a personal relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, “remembering that the Trinity is our Maker, our Keeper, our Lover and endless Joy.”

St. Thomas Aquinas’ five proofs for the existence of God

During his life, Thomas Aquinas developed “five proofs” for the existence of God. The *Catechism* (31) frames the Thomastic proofs with these words: “*These are called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of ‘converging and convincing arguments’ which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.*” The following is a brief summary of Aquinas’ five proofs.

The Unmoved Mover. Life is in motion (e.g. neutrons, electrons, protons, atoms, etc.). For life to be in motion, there must have been a “first mover” to get everything going. That “First Mover” is God.

First Cause. Nothing causes itself. An egg needs a chicken; children are caused by parents who are caused by their parents. If we keep going back, we must conclude that there must be a First Cause or Uncaused Cause which is eternal and whom we call God. Even those who accept the “big bang” theory as the origin of the universe must explain where the primeval matter that started everything came from. The only logical answer is an “Uncaused Cause.”

Everything Comes from Something. “Nothing” cannot create “something.” For the possibility of everything else to exist, by necessity there had to be something in existence first. That something we call God.

Supreme Model. There is something we call truest and best against which we measure everything else that is true and good. We can compare *degrees* of qualities like goodness, truth, beauty, justice, etc., to a Supreme Model. This perfect Model of goodness, truth and beauty is the perfect Being we call God.

Grand Designer. The order in nature isn’t just a happy accident. Reason moves us to conclude that there is a Grand Designer or a Great Intelligence who made it all. One we call God. C.K. Chesterton once said, “Show me a watch without a watchmaker, then I’ll take a universe without a Universe-Maker.”

Other beliefs about God

There are many views of God held by people in our world. The following are some of them.

Deism. Deism is a child of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Deists believe in God but deny that he plays any active role in their creation. He is like an absentee landlord. Some hold that *Deism* has been replaced today by *secular humanism* which sees no need for God or religious belief. We are self-sufficient and self-explanatory. Secular humanists make people and their achievements the center of their world. **Pantheism.** Pantheists believe that God is in everything and that everything is God or is an aspect of God. Pantheists do not believe in a God who is separate from his creation. They do not believe in the transcendence or ‘otherness’ of God.

Atheism. Atheists deny the existence of God. They hold that God is just an excuse for what cannot be explained. As scientists explain the “mysteries” of the universe, we will have no need for the belief in God.

Agnosticism. Agnosticism comes from a Greek word which is translated as “don’t know” or “no knowledge.” Agnostics hold that God’s existence cannot be proved or disproved.

Polytheism. Polytheists are people who believe in many gods and goddesses. Polytheism was popular in ancient Rome and Greece.

Theism/Monotheism. Theists or monotheists believe in one God. Jews, Christians and Muslims are theists or monotheists. All of these three religions accept Abraham as their spiritual father and believe in the God of Abraham.

Christianity. Christians are Trinitarian theists. They believe in One God in whom there are three divine Persons.

Take some time to contemplate the awesome truth that through baptism, the Trinity dwells in us and we dwell in the Trinity. Take time to not only read but contemplate this beautiful prayer by St. Catherine of Siena.

Meditation

*You, Eternal Trinity, are a sea so deep that the more I enter in, the more I find;
and the more I find, the more I seek of you; for when the soul is satisfied in your abyss, it is not satisfied,
but it ever continues to thirst for you, Eternal Trinity, desiring to behold you with the light of your light. As the heart
desires the springs of living water,
so does my soul desire
to leave the prison of this dark body and to behold you in truth.
O how long shall your face be hidden from my eyes?
O abyss, O eternal Godhead, O deep sea! Clothe me with yourself, Eternal Trinity, so that I may run this
mortal life
with true obedience,
and with the light of your most holy faith.
Amen.*

(St. Catherine of Siena)